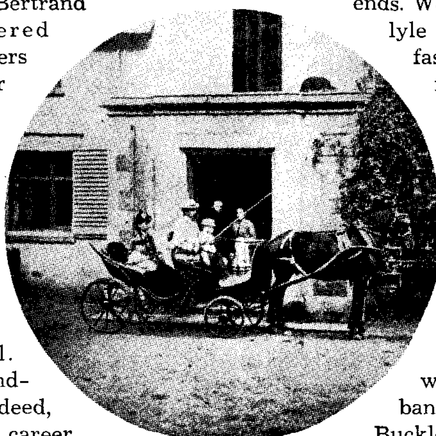
Notes on Some Victorians

THE AMBERLEY PAPERS: The Letters and Diaries of Bertrand Russell's Parents. By Bertrand and Patricia Russell. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1937. *Two volumes.* $10.

Reviewed by HENRY HAZLITT

BERTRAND RUSSELL'S father, John Russell, afterwards Lord Amberley, was the eldest son of the one-time Prime Minister of England, Lord John (afterwards Earl) Russell. His mother, Kate Stanley, was a daughter of Lord Stanley of Alderley. Both were born in 1842; they were married in 1864, when she was twenty-two and he was still only twenty-one. Bertrand's mother died from diphtheria when he was two years old, and his father died twenty months later. The result was that he has no recollection of his mother, and only very faint recollections of his father. He was brought up by his paternal grandmother.

It must have been with a peculiar delight, therefore, that Bertrand Russell first discovered these journals and letters of his parents. For they reveal two young people with the intellectual and moral qualities that he himself admires and so notably exemplifies. They were widely curious, candid, ardent, "advanced," rational. Amberley's open-mindedness and candor, indeed, cost him his political career. He was defeated in the general election of 1868 chiefly because reports got about that he had discussed birth control, not unfavorably, at a private meeting in London. After this he devoted himself to writing. His style and thinking were greatly influenced by John Stuart Mill. It was Mill's "Subjection of Women," also, that emboldened Kate Amberley to become an ardent feminist, addressing meetings in favor of women's suffrage. The cumulative effect of free-thought, feminism, and the suspicion of "Malthusianism" was to shock society. But the Amberleys had always, when possible, comments their distinguished son, "chosen their associates for brains, and in their later years they saw very little of the grand folk who figure in their early diaries."



LORD AND LADY AMBERLEY, 1871

Though Amberley wrote some abstract articles of unusual acumen, it is Kate's journals that are usually much the more interesting and pungent. These volumes are by no means merely a pious family album of narrow appeal. They are not only a peculiarly intimate picture of the Victorian age as a whole, but of some of its greatest literary and intellectual figures. We are back in the atmosphere which suggested "The Mikado" when we read of the appearance of the Japanese Ambassadors in England for the first time, at the opening of the exhibition of 1862: "There were four of them curiously dressed in petticoats & dressing gowns like the painted figures on the screens but wearing two large swords in front of them." We get confirmation of Queen Victoria's unpopularity in 1866 in Kate's entry in her journal: "No respect or loyalty seems left in the way people allow themselves to talk of the Queen saying things like: 'What do we pay her for if she will not do her work' and 'she had better abdicate if she is incompetent to do her duty,'" etc., etc.

These are entries that persons less fortunately placed might have made. But the Amberleys were constantly meeting the literary great at dinner parties and week-ends. We get glimpses of Carlyle uttering violently fascist opinions, interminably talking and saying that people had far better not talk; of Jane Carlyle being self-consciously the martyr, "she is come here for a week . . . to get a new coat to her nerves she says, for it is wanted after living with a dispeptic husband"; of the historian Buckle, "very agreeable but certainly conceited," who told how long he slept and what exercise he took as if it were very important; of Anthony Trollope and Thomas Huxley at the same dinner party, with "T's voice too loud," drowning out Huxley's "pleasant quiet voice"; of George Lewes, likable, but "desperately ugly, small, dirty looking, long hair and bad complexion"; of his wife George Eliot, "an ugly large woman"; of Renan, "hideously ugly like a toad in face." Mrs. Grote gives an unflattering picture of Mrs. Mill, and we get many sidelights on the philosopher himself. His nobility and his rather naive optimism (the latter quality was shared by the age) are combined in this comment: "He said the great thing was to consider one's opponents as one's allies; as people climbing the hill on the other side. This view he said was becoming more held every day."

The Amberleys came to America shortly after the Civil War, and met Agassiz, Longfellow, Lowell, and Emerson. "Mrs. E. is an invalid, with a face so ghastly that she looks like a corpse; she is a decided Christian in belief, does not understand her husband's mind, and disapproves of him. . . . Emerson himself I found a very kind, gentle, amiable man; his face, smile and accent are remarkably like Gladstone's; he talks much, and goes on a long time without any question or remark being made by the listener; . . . he evidently feels great regret about Carlyle's despotic and anti-liberal views."

Bertrand Russell himself appears in these diaries and letters only as a baby who "lifts his head and looks about in a very energetic way"; who is about to be, but luckily is not, named Galahad; and who is brought into the room with his brother when his father is dying: "The Dr. lifted Bertrand up & he kissed him gently and softly & said, 'Goodbye my little dears for ever.'"

Stories Are Not Essays

THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF 1937. Edited by Edward J. O'Brien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1937. $2.50.

Reviewed by FRANCES WOODWARD

THIS year Mr. O'Brien has assembled twenty-nine stories for his book, ranging in length from very short pieces to three which he wants us to call "novellas." Many of these stories are very good; most of them have excellent moments. But as a group they present a curious aspect, particularly after Mr. O'Brien's insistence that they are the best, and his pontifical prefaces. It is difficult to believe that experiment in fictional form is admirable solely because it is experiment, or that the amateur is the sacred cow of the arts. To conceive with high ambition is not enough; a successful short story is one which beyond reasonable doubt achieves the goal it set out for. If short pieces of contemporary fiction must be explained to contemporary readers we embark on the use of words to explain words to explain words and end up in a philological laboratory. The story cast in the stream of consciousness form, such as Emma Goldchaux's "Chains" and Ursula MacDougall's "Titty's Dead and Tatty Weeps" is disastrously dangerous to play with. In this technique Virginia Woolf is triumphant, yet Mrs. Woolf herself places on her readers so tremendous a burden of informed response, supposes in them so delicate and diverse a knowledge of today's nuances, that one may wonder with genuine alarm if she will, fifty years from now, be understandable to any but those who approach her steeped in research.

All the Year Book stories have in common the discarding of plot for the development of character, a preoccupation with man's isolation, an indirection or misdirection of human normality. Nearly all of them are laxly overwritten. The tightest,

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least rambling ones are apt to be those like Morley Callaghan's "The Voyage Out" and Buckner's "The Man Who Won the War," which appeared respectively in the *New Yorker* and *Scribner's*, both magazines which set sharp space limits.

By and large the stories end, in Mr. O'Brien's own phrase, "in a moment of arrested significant reality." It is not universally satisfactory to have characters drift away from the reader, back into the author's mind, unjelled by their exposure to narrative, and in most cases such endings leave a feeling of incompetence rather than an awe of the higher artistry. A happy exception to this unease is Paul Horgan's "The Surgeon and the Nun." His characters, in a tale of violent and unexpected encounter, disappear from view not because the author leaves them at loose ends but because of the inevitable impermanence inherent in their meeting at all.

Of the three "novellas" (none of which is longer than twelve thousand words) I. V. Morris's "Marching Orders" appears the least successful, the one which would most have benefited by compression. "The Iron City," by Lovell Thompson, and Ellis St. Joseph's "Passenger to Bali" are both Conradian stories, and the sea paces the mood. There are fine passages in "The Iron City." Of the vernacular stories Jesse Stuart's "Hair" comes out the best.

Ernest Hemingway at his best needs no one to affirm his superiority. "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" made an event of the issue of *Esquire* in which it was published, and makes an event of the O'Brien book. It also makes as good a criterion as any from which to sum up the anthology. Almost without exception the O'Brien authors present death, negation, futility, and the more unpleasant dilemmas in which our carcases involve us, and present them in unconventional fiction forms. So does Hemingway. But he does not feel it necessary to perform some preposterous surgery on the human entity which lops off the inseparable other qualities of laughter, wordliness, cynicism, hard tenderness, and viscera. His writing plans are clear, and his tools are sharp. Too few of his anthology companions see people in the round. Too few of them see the structure of a story as meticulously laid out as an architect's blue print, and its unfolding, whether in dialogue, mind, or setting, as precise as the informed blows of a master carpenter's hammer. They dismiss plot as a "contrivance." I wonder. Many of them write well. Plainly all of them are excessively critical. They would be the first to say that though a sonnet of sixteen lines might be a poem it would not be a sonnet. A "story" is a tale to tell. It is not a philosophical or neurological essay, nor a novel fragment, nor a highly inferred sketch; when a story turns out to be any of these things it is not, with all due respect to Mr. O'Brien, either a story or "the best."

Supermen and Cosmic Rays

STAR-BEGOTTEN. By H. G. Wells. New York: The Viking Press. 1937. $1.75.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

FAITH is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. "The Croquet Player" suggested that even Wells was beginning to lose hope for the current human race, bedeviled by its antediluvian inheritance; but he still believes in the Great Race to come, and he is not willing, as is Olaf Stapledon, to wait through a few million years of recurrent catastrophe till evolution works it out. "Starry souls are born not made," says one of his latest characters; and "Star-Begotten" is a fanciful-hopeful suggestion of how the Word might be made flesh in time to offer some nourishment to an elderly utopist, who cannot wait much longer if he is to see the kingdom of Heaven this side of Jordan.

The book commences with the uneasy apprehensions of Mr. Joseph Davis, an expectant father who does not understand his wife and expects still less to understand her offspring. The name has an obvious symbolism but Wells presently drops that as he drops the scientific conjecture that serves as a springboard for his tale—that cosmic rays may perhaps, or just might, affect chromosomes and thus become the cause of mutations. "The vast majority of these mutations are aimless and useless," says the scientist who first mentions them; but the aimless and useless will not do for Wells. So another character suggests that the Martians on their worn-out planet, too wise to think they might ever occupy this one (probably because they read "The War of the Worlds" and realized their disabilities) are shooting cosmic rays at us, hoping to hit a chromosome now and then and transfer a bit of Martian character and intelligence to a human body.

To Mr. Joseph Davis (and his creator) this idea has much appeal. Before long we lose sight of aimless and useless mutations; to the little group of three devotees who develop the idea every human being of outstanding quality becomes a "starry soul" shot into our midst on a cosmic ray, if not by Martians at least by Somebody (though Wells would not admit the capital) who realizes that something drastic must be done about the human race. A few thousand years ago the extra-terrestrial marksmen had not found the range, hits were few (Socrates, Buddha, etc.); but now the aim is improving. "A new sort of mind is coming into the world, with a new, simpler, clearer, and more powerful way of thinking." So far these Martians, or supermen, or whatever you call them have appeared chiefly as inventors; for, unaware of what they are and tangled up in irrational hu-

H. G. WELLS. *Caricature by Covarrubias, from "In the Worst Possible Taste" by John Riddell (Scribners).*

man relations, they can make little progress in social behavior but they can do wonders with things. But presently they will recognize one another, they will begin to get together—informally, half-consciously, but "may not all these clearer intelligences, confronted with the same problems, arrive at practically identical judgments about them? I cling to the belief that for the human brain, properly working, there is one wisdom and not many." Thus a character who has evidently read his Wells, and knows what the "one wisdom" will look like.

When these supermen, mostly scientific experts, begin to behave rationally, it will be hard on the Paleolithic survivals who now rule the world. Aviators will decide to bomb their own G.H.Q. instead of the enemy's, surgeons called in to cure dictators will kill them instead. To the laymen it may look as if things would be even more confused than they are now; but to the eye of faith, enlightened by the one wisdom, it is a bright prospect. "Not a revolution, a new kind of behavior; . . . the Enlightenment." Though "there may have to be a certain amount of fighting and killing, police hunts for would-be dictators and gangsters, etc."

None of this is very new, and it calls for no more comment than any other escapist apocalypse. Except that being written by Wells, it is far more entertaining than most of them; especially as he lapses frequently into his apotropaic mood, thinking of all the things other people might say about his previous books (never the current one, of course) and saying them better by way of averting the divine displeasure.

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